

# Creating a Learner-centered Teacher Education Program

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Teacher education is based on the assumption that students will eventually teach in the way that they were taught (Johnson 1995). At İnönü University in Turkey, an ELT teacher education program has set out to change students' beliefs about language learning and teaching during their preparatory year, and thus to create a new type of language teacher in Turkey. Since these students are studying to become teachers, it is important early in their careers to impart the notion of learner-centered education. This means organizing a class so that students are more involved in the teaching and learning process and the teacher is less likely to dominate classroom events (Nunan 1995). We have found that a learner-centered classroom enhances students' development in the process of becoming teachers.

English instruction in Turkey is important because without English proficiency, professionals in many sectors of society are blocked from career advancement. The need for more and effective English language teachers is greater than ever before. Yet language education is particularly challenging in Turkey, as it is in other parts of the world, due to the traditional classroom in which teachers are considered authorities and the learning environment is teacher-centered. In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, some students are motivated to learn English. However, we believe that students progress more rapidly in learning English in a more learner-centered environment.

This article describes how we created a learner-centered classroom environment with students who come from a teacher-centered background. We explain how we used the communicative approach, process writing, cooperative learning, and strategy and style awareness in courses in listening and speaking, grammar, and writing. We suggest how a teacher can give up some control of the classroom, but not lose control, while creating a learner-centered environment.

## **The learner-centered classroom**

Creating a learner-centered classroom is a response to the problem created when a student's learning style differs from the teacher's teaching style. The way a teacher presents subject matter may conflict with students' ideas about learning, thus resulting in no learning. Therefore, it is the teacher's duty to respect individual learner differences and to assist the students in discovering their own learning processes and preferences. It requires putting students at the center of classroom organization and respecting their needs, strategies, and styles.

In a learner-centered environment, students become autonomous learners, which accelerates the language learning process. A learner-centered environment is communicative and authentic. It trains students to work in small groups or pairs and to negotiate meaning in a broad context. The negotiation of meaning develops students' communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980)

and provides comprehensible input (Long 1980). Crookes and Chaudron (1991:57) provide an accurate summary:

The teacher-dominated classroom ("teacher-fronted") is characterized by the teacher's speaking most of the time, leading activities, and constantly passing judgment on student performance, whereas in a highly student-centered classroom, students will be observed working individually or in pairs and small groups, each on distinct tasks and projects.

In short, a student-centered environment becomes a solution to student and teacher differences by providing the learner with more autonomy and control. The only caveat is that students may become out of control in a student-centered classroom, and conflicts about learning may arise between teachers and learners. Nunan (1988) covers the problematic situation that emerges when teacher methodology goes against what students believe is appropriate. Since our students at İnönü University are coming from very teacher-centered classrooms, we introduce a learner-centered environment step-by-step so students won't at first resist our ideas. Resistance includes disruptive classroom behavior and the students' failure to attend class, and results in the teacher's loss of prestige.

Introducing a learner-centered environment requires more than one single adaptation of a traditional classroom. We knew that moving from explicit to implicit instruction and from controlled to free language production would require several changes. The techniques chosen would have to support the development of a learner-centered environment while maintaining classroom control and providing students with a rationale for the changes. Overall, we tried to utilize interactive activities of the communicative approach, which gave students opportunities to use the target language. We also encouraged student contributions to lesson planning and presentation, which got them involved in teaching the class. Finally, we wanted them to take more responsibility for their own learning.

## **Listening and speaking course**

The aim of the preparatory program is to develop and improve students' communicative competence in the four language skills. The program has a modest start with only 21 students, all under 21 years old and at an intermediate level of English proficiency. In speaking and listening courses, the most noticeable adaptations to a learner-centered classroom were implemented by using communicative methods that involve interactive tasks and activities. We established a learner-centered environment in these courses in four ways:

1. Stating the goals and objectives of each lesson verbally and in writing.
2. Using controlled, guided, and free activities in a progressive order.
3. Evaluating the usefulness of pedagogical tasks by administering a questionnaire.
4. Involving students in determining lesson content whenever possible.

Step 1 is to write the goals and objectives of the lesson on the board and then explain them clearly at the beginning of each lesson. Communicative tasks and activities are a novelty to our students, and they want to know the reasoning behind them. Also, these new communicative activities with negotiating, role-playing, and transferring information can be confusing.

Therefore, it is necessary to clue the students into this teaching approach by explicitly stating the purposes underlying the new tasks and activities in the daily lesson plan.

Second, we rotate from controlled to guided to free, and thereby achieve balanced activities (Crookes and Chaudron 1991). Communicative tasks and activities take a variety of forms, and this variety helps students with mixed speaking and listening abilities to get involved.

Controlled activities are highly structured and get nonparticipatory, low-level students involved in speaking and listening. For example:

- Students volunteer answers to display questions from the teacher.
- Students fill out a chart from the book on a topic being presented by the teacher.
- Students look at an illustration from the book and discuss what they see.

Guided activities, on the other hand, appeal to students at an intermediate level of speaking proficiency. For example:

- Students ask one another questions and answer them in turn (an information exchange).
- Students write an original dialogue or narrative and then role-play it for the class.
- Pairs present their dialogue or narrative to another pair to summarize (an information transfer).

Free activities appeal to students who are highly communicative. For example:

- Students freely discuss a topic provided by the teacher.
- Students report individually to the class on a subject they know a lot about.
- Students work together to come up with a solution to a problem posed by the teacher.

Later in the academic term, a third step is to evaluate the usefulness of pedagogical tasks by eliciting student feedback on these activities with a questionnaire. Nunan (1995) emphasizes that teachers should discover their students' feelings about the learning process. The list of balanced classroom activities, from controlled to guided to free, was rated according to the following scale:

*Directions: For your speaking and listening class, rate the following activities according to the scale given below.*

5. *I always like this activity*
4. *I usually like this activity*
3. *I sometimes like this activity*
2. *I seldom like this activity*
1. *I never like this activity*

We discovered with the questionnaire how useful communicative activities were for learning. Different students liked different activities more than others; but none of the activities were unanimously disliked. The questionnaire results were shared with the students in order to limit

negative reactions to activities that didn't appeal to individual student's learning styles. The questionnaire results revealed that other students found the activities appealing. Moreover, from the results of the questionnaire, students became aware that all activity types are effective and by engaging in all of them, their language learning opportunities will improve.

Finally, we got students involved in lesson content. Studies show that student-initiated interaction results in more comprehensible input than teacher initiated-interaction. Entire lesson plans can be built on student-initiated topics in which most students take an interest. Student-initiated topics can be encouraged by the teacher by asking referential questions instead of display questions, that is, questions to which the speaker does not already know the answer and which have a variety of possible answers (Crookes and Chaudron 1991). An open-ended referential question could invite students' viewpoints on any topic. For example, our students enjoyed discussing journalism in Turkey, gun control, and the environmental impact of tourism.

### **Grammar course**

While speaking and listening courses focused on communicative competence for fluency of expression, the grammar course focused on explicit presentation of grammar rules for accuracy of expression. The grammar course is a popular course with our students because it conforms to their previous experiences with learning the language code through a teacher-fronted method. However, in addition to explicit rule presentation, we helped students understand implicit rules, using communicative activities again. We incorporated interactive and meaningful tasks and activities to highlight relevant grammatical explanations.

Communicative language teaching relates forms to meaning (Littlewood 1981). In order for students to grasp grammatical features of the target language, we teach the language forms first by rules, then in structured activities. Structured activities begin with a teacher prompt, and students' replies are limited and inauthentic. However, from the structured activity, we move on to communicative functions which are naturally more authentic. Communicative functions teach students how to use the target language to perform specific tasks such as to give advice, make suggestions, describe, request, compare, and so on. While we are aware that real communication is still limited in this procedure, students are made aware to associate these practices and put their explicit knowledge to use in other course work.

### **Process writing**

In the writing course, other adaptations for learner-centeredness and autonomy were put in place through process writing, which creates highly skilled writers (Krapels 1990). It also presents many opportunities for classroom interaction, because students are taken through prewriting steps that require them to draft and revise before producing a final written product (Kroll 1991). Within these steps—that is, preparing for writing, organizing the writing, drafting, and evaluating—we have multiple opportunities for creating a learner-centered environment. Later in the academic year, with process writing already in place, we created more of a learner-centered classroom environment in three other ways:

1. Students were given opportunities to become teachers of the writing content.
2. Students interacted through peer editing.

3. Students broadened their discourse communities through electronic publishing.

First, a prewriting technique gave our students the opportunity to become the teacher. The technique can take the form of grammar exercises, reading with comprehension exercises, or a discussion of previous readings. With 21 students in our program, we evenly divided students into cooperative groups. Each group was given a short text with comprehension and vocabulary exercises and discussion questions. Three students from each group led the entire class through these simple activities. Using an overhead projector with transparencies, students followed this procedure:

1. The entire class read a short text on an engaging theme.
2. One student prepared vocabulary questions while another student prepared comprehension questions, and both individuals led the activity in turn.
3. The third student then led a discussion with prepared questions relevant to the theme of the text.
4. The rest of the class took notes during this prewriting step to use later in preparing a first draft of a composition on the theme.

Second, we created a learner-centered classroom through peer editing. Using the process approach allows students to design and interact with written materials and with each other. Once they have completed the prewriting procedure mentioned above, and with a first draft in hand, students can proceed to peer edit by exchanging papers and commenting on each other's product. A helpful peer editing technique is to use a structured checklist, samples of which can be found in many recent writing textbooks. The checklist helps students look for specific elements of effective writing, such as topic sentences, supporting details, a conclusion, transitions, and correct punctuation. We had students design the peer editing checklist together as an additional activity, based on the goals and objectives of the course. (See the appendix below for two sample checklists.)

Finally, in the writing course students were also given the opportunity to reach a larger discourse community outside their classroom by publishing their compositions on a faculty member's Internet Web page. This required that students evaluate each other's final drafts and choose the best ones. First, we put students' writing on a bulletin board and devoted a class period to having students read each other's work and check the one they liked most. (During this evaluation process, it is useful to block out students' names so that choices are based on the written content rather than personal allegiance.) Then, the composition with the most checks was typed up and posted to the Web page. The chosen work was made available on the Internet and the honored writer's identity revealed. The noticeable rise in writer motivation level proved that this method is effective.

## **Cooperative learning**

We adopted even more innovative approaches and techniques in learner centeredness in the reading course by forming cooperative groups. Cooperative group learning is an instructional strategy that calls for students to work together in groups in order to achieve a common learning goal (Slavin 1983). During this collaborative work, students develop social skills as well as

language proficiency. We begin to create a learner-centered environment by again giving students opportunities to research and choose their content materials through discourse communities outside the classroom, namely the Internet.

The first step is setting up base groups. These are long-term heterogeneous groups with stable membership whose primary responsibility is to provide members with support and encouragement in completing course requirements and assignments. We tried hard to keep the groups together. When a group did not work well, we avoided breaking it up, even if the group requested it; and we helped them to learn to cope with and overcome their unproductive interactions.

These cooperative groups engaged in project work using topics from the reading textbook as a model—for example, education, news, wealth, food, marriage, travel, and world issues—and then found an article from an outside source, usually online. Some of the Internet sources they utilized were yahoo.com, CNN.com, edweek.com, the BBC online and the *English Teaching Forum* online. Next, we required the groups to present a report of the material they chose. Each time, a different member led the presentation to the rest of the class. During their reports, each group presented the new vocabulary they learned from the article, and all groups were given vocabulary quizzes every two weeks. Finally, the groups submitted a copy of the project to the teacher for evaluation. All group members got the same grade on the group task.

## **Learning strategy and style awareness**

Within the reading class, in addition to the cooperative learning activities, we presented students with an entire unit devoted to raising awareness of learning styles and strategies. Language learning strategies are the conscious steps or behaviors used by language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall, and use of new information (Rigney 1978; Oxford 1990). Using strategies enhances learner autonomy and self-direction. A specific learning style is a sensitive sensory channel. Style awareness determines learners' preferred channels, matches their styles with the instructors' teaching style, and encourages students to develop their weaker areas. To create a learner-centered environment, we raised students' awareness of learning strategies and styles in three steps.

First, to prepare students for the unit, we discussed learning strategies. The discussion related specific strategies to familiar learning situations, such as guessing the meaning of new words, a common compensation strategy in reading. We gave students examples of reading passages in which unknown words could be deciphered from the given context. Other strategies included memory strategies, in which students can group new words from a text in order to create a mental link.

Second, for students to better understand their own learning strategies and styles, we administered Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) and O'Brien's (1990) Learning Channel Preference Checklist (LCPC). The SILL scores allow students to identify their language learning strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, students became aware of which strategies best suit their abilities. The LCPC scores help students determine their own learning preferences as well as the style the teacher uses when presenting lessons.

Third, we taught language learning strategies and styles using a formal presentation. We transferred onto overhead slides an outline of Oxford's (1990) classification of six types of learning strategies: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social. There are only three types of learning styles: visual, auditory, and haptic. This neat categorization makes for an appealing lesson.

Applying strategies to learning is challenging in a theoretical sense, but the opportunities to apply strategies to course work and to associate them to specific lessons are almost endless. Any classroom activity applies a learning strategy and we attempted to draw students' attention to it. For example, students used to teacher-centered instruction often want to know the reason for doing group work and question its value. We explain that group work is a social strategy involving cooperation with others to achieve a common goal. Once students understand this, the learning environment is improved.

Applying learning styles in the classroom means student must be aware of their preferred sensory channel. For example, when the teacher uses a visual aid in lesson content, certain students who are not visually oriented may lose the thread, while others quickly see what they are learning. A kinesthetic, hands-on activity is useful for haptic learners, but it may boggle other learners. A verbal presentation tunes out some non-auditory learners completely. But the fact that students are made aware of different styles helps them to refocus their sensory channel.

## Conclusion

This article has explained why and how we created a learner-centered classroom in our teacher education program. We believe that such an environment can be achieved in any classroom context. In fact, learner-centered classroom setup does not rely on preset formulas or magical recipes; rather, it requires involving students in the teaching process. We discovered that success meant slowly implementing new techniques and thereby adapting students so they would understand lesson goals and objectives, value communicative tasks and activities, generate topics and choose materials, work cooperatively, and identify their own learning strategies and styles. A successful learner-centered environment also requires frequent student feedback. What should be emphasized is that learner-centered methods should proceed in a moderate, adaptive pace. We should help students who are accustomed to a teacher-fronted classroom to accept a change in classroom organization so they may gain the benefits of being at the center of the learning process.

Note: We invite teachers and other students to read our students' compositions online: <http://web.inonu.edu.tr/~mzaltan>.

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## Appendix

### 1st Draft Peer Editing Checklist

Theme: Responding to a Proverb

Writer \_\_\_\_\_ Peer editor \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the proverb or quote?
2. Does the writer correctly put quotation marks around the proverb? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes  
\_\_\_\_\_ No
3. What does the proverb/quote mean?
4. What is the writer's response to the proverb/quote? Does s/he agree or disagree with it?
5. How does the writer explain his/her response? Does the writer give one detailed example, reasons, several short examples, or another pattern of organization?
6. Is there a lesson from this proverb? What is it?
7. Did you enjoy reading the response to the proverb? Why or why not? Explain.

### 1st Draft Peer Editing Checklist

Theme: Definition

Writer \_\_\_\_\_ Peer editor \_\_\_\_\_

1. Does the paragraph use good form? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
2. Does the topic sentence of the paragraph have a main idea and controlling idea?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
3. Underline the main idea and controlling idea on the writer's first draft.
4. Does the topic sentence contain a dictionary definition? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
5. If so, does the dictionary definition use correct quotation marks and punctuation?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
6. How does the writer define the term? (circle)  
Examples    Description    Classification    Chronological History    Stating what it is not
7. How many times is the keyword repeated?
8. Are there any unclear details that need additional explanation? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
9. Do you understand the term better now that you have read this definition? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes  
\_\_\_\_\_ No    Why or Why not?